GENERAL EDUCATION IN SOVIET BELORUSSIA

871 The development of Soviet schools in the Belorussian SSR during the first decade of Soviet rule took a somewhat different path from that in the other parts of the Soviet Union. Until 1921, Belorussia was an arena of wars and occupation, first German and then Polish. If the Council of Peoples Commissaries of the RSFSR decreed on August 21st, 1923, that the preparation of a project for general education should be undertaken, in the BSSR such a decree was issued only three years later, on April 7th, 1926. In the RSFSR lower and upper division schools were organized from the very beginning. In Belorussia the public schools adopted a seven year program which was separated into two divisions: the lower, comprising the first to fourth grades (the elementary school) and the upper, comprising the fifth to seventh grades. Technical schools of various specialties with four years of training included secondary education and paved the way to higher institutions of learning. The pernicious experiments of the State Learned Council of the People's Commissariat for Education of the RSFSR affected the schools of Belorussia to a lesser degree. The People's Commissariat for Education of the BSSR was headed by the intelligent pedagogue V. Ignatovskii, professor at the Teachers' Institute. His pedagogical experience and knowledge of public schools did not allow Professor Ignatovskii to take the road of careless school reforms. In 1929 he was accused [661] of national democratism, and committed suicide. In 1930, widespread arrests of educators took place. Several experienced pedagogues in the People's Commissariat for Education of the BSSR were also arrested. After 1930, the original conservatism in matters concerning the schools of Belorussia was liquidated, and in the course of two to three years the schools assumed the monotonous Soviet form.

The Second World War quite definitely put an end to this chaotic educational regime in the Soviet schools and for many years [727] hampered the "completion" of general education. School affairs in Belorussia suffered particularly during the German occupation. Only through the great efforts and self-sacrificing work of Belorussian public workers and the local population, was it possible to arrange for work in schools and even to organize teachers' seminars during the war.

during the war. 871

Representatives of Soviet authority in their talks, the press, as well as in the propaganda which they disseminate, constantly claim that all the domains of industry, agriculture and culture in the USSR have not only been fully restored but have even surpassed the pre-war level.

"After the victorious end of the great patriotic war the school system was quickly restored. Universal general compulsory education lasting for seven years has been introduced since 1949 and is supposed to be carried out in the course of three years." (Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia / Large Soviet Encyclopedia/, vol. 9, p. 316).

But what in reality is the condition of the schools in Soviet Belorussia? One can judge the activity of the schools by the articles and notes, not particularly numerous, which usually appear in the Soviet papers toward the beginning and end of the school year. In these articles considerable space is devoted to /68/ dithyrambs addressed to the Communist Party and the Soviet government on their "constant care for national education". Very great successes and achievements in the work of the schools are also commented upon. But the real, far from comforting, situation in the restoration of schools is nevertheless to be detected in the newspaper notes. Here are some examples. The organ of the Communist Party of Belorussia, Zviazda, in its leading article of June 9th, comments: "The low level of success of students in Russian, Belorussian and mathematics is recorded every year in many rayons, oblast's, and even throughout the Republic. It is necessary to analyze the work of schools and teachers thoroughly, to reveal the real reasons for the low level of success in many schools. In a number of oblast's from year to year the law of general education is not being enforced".

The same paper, in its issue of August 8th, on the eve of the school year, demands insistently from all Party, soviet, trade union and other organizations that they "should see that the law of general education is fully enforced. Local soviets and school directors need to verify the lists of children subject to education once again."

In the current year, the Ministry of National Education of the BSSR has already conducted an inspection of the enforcement of

871 the general education law in the Mogilevskaya and Baranovicheskaya oblast'. The inspection revealed the far from comforting state of general education in these oblast's. In the majority of the rayons of the oblast's which were inspected the registration of school age children is conducted very carelessly, and in some places registration is utterly absent (the Kamenskiy village soviet of the Kletskiy rayon). The population areas covered by some of the schools are not determined, and for that reason these schools have no responsibility for the registration of children. Also, there is no account of the reasons for long absences and general failure to attend school. It has been determined that merely in the Liakhovicheskiy rayon of the Baranovicheskaya oblast' for unexplained reasons no more than 90 children are being taught. As a result of the surveys, the lowest attendance of schools has been found in the Shklovskiy, Mstislavskiy, Khotimskiy, Novomyshskiy, Ivetskiy, Kletskiy, Bytenskiy, and other rayons. "In every one of these rayons some 100 and more children do not attend school", notes the Uchitel'skaia Gazeta on its pages of October 17th, 1953. More than 200 rayons can be counted in Soviet Belorussia, which means that more than 20,000 children are not attending school.

How can one explain the fact that children leave school for a time and often do not attend it at all? On the other hand, how explain the indulgence on the part of the Soviet authorities towards a population which is not abiding by the law of general education? The reasons are very simple. There are no special funds at the schools for offering help to children in obtaining clothes and footwear, no means are provided for the preparation of hot breakfasts. There are no living quarters for students at the schools, and transportation is not arranged for those living far from school. Soviet authority, with all its severity regarding the execution of its decrees, cannot "oblige" and force the barefooted, poorly dressed and hungry children of kolkhozniks to attend school in rain and in the severe winter weather. Soviet authority has declined to fulfill the obligation decreed in 1918 and confirmed by the Soviet government act of August 14th, 1930, "On general compulsory education". It refuses to offer state assistance to school children. This is why general education is not carried out in the schools.

346 /70/ The success of school work depends on many things and
871 to a considerable degree on conditions of training. For successful

training, preservation of the health of students, and for their normal physical development, dry, warm, sunny, spacious classrooms with a sufficient amount of fresh air are necessary. During the war the school buildings in Belorussia were almost completely destroyed. Only ruins remained of large cities. But in smaller towns and villages the school buildings with rare exceptions were preserved at the beginning of the war. Later, however, with the development of partisan warfare in Belorussia, schools, hospitals, restored churches and other public buildings were, at the order of Moscow, completely burned by the partisans. This senseless barbarity caused great damage to the Belorussian people and its younger generation. Schools in villages were of no strategic importance and could not have been used by the Germans for military purposes. Part of the school buildings were destroyed together with the villages in various German maneuvers during the battles with partisans. We have already mentioned that Soviet propaganda claims that what was destroyed by the war has been restored, and that includes schools. Unfortunately, a wide discrepancy exists between Soviet propaganda and reality. The construction of schools in the BSSR is in an intolerable state, and the results of the "peaceful socialist construction" are far from comforting. This is proved by the scanty information which is appearing in the Soviet press. "The fact that the plan for the large-scale construction of school buildings and putting them to use has not been fulfilled year after year, can no longer be tolerated", writes Zviazda of May 31st, this year. One fact which attracts attention is the failure of school construction as a generally Belorussian phenomenon and furthermore an annual, therefore a constant one. It is reported in the paper that "the Polesskaya oblast' did not fulfill the plan for using the means assigned for the construction of schools: 18. 5 per cent in 1950, 23. 5 per cent in 1951, and 39, 3 per cent in 1952. The percentage of "exploitation" of the means for the construction of schools in the Polesskaya oblast' has been constantly decreasing for the last three years. In 1952, 40 per cent of the projected schools were not built. The Polesskaya oblast' is no exception: schools are not being built in the Molodechinskaya, Bobruiskaya, Vitebskaya or Polotskaya oblast's either. In the Polotskaya oblast' "of the two million rubles released by the government for the planned construction of schools, only 30 per cent has been used". The paper Zviazda of June 3rd of this

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871 year notes that 466 thousand rubles were assigned for the construction of the Vetrinskaya school in the Polotskaya oblast', but only 195,000 rubles have been used so far, and that not advantageously. Unsuitable brick was supplied, which was used in the building of walls. When the builders noticed it, 25,000 bricks had to be torn down and new bricks used for rebuilding the walls. In this way at least 35 to 40 per cent of the means annually assigned for building schools is not used. This means that it is not enough to have Soviet rubles in store: school buildings must be assured of labor power and building material. And the schools are the last of all to receive these advantages. Financial means, labor power and building material are first assigned to constructions of military significance, as the Soviet rulers know very well.

[474] Apart from the state constructions, there exists in villages the so-called "method of the people's construction". This method is very simple. Beside many other economic campaigns the kolkhozniks /71/ of a rayon are bound to build with their own efforts and means several schools, clubs, reading rooms, bridges, etc. The paper Zviazda quotes as an example the Sharkovskiy rayon in the Polotskaya oblast', which accepted the obligation to build at the beginning of the school year, by the "method of the people's construction", five seven-grade and one elementary School, to expand the school capacity to one thousand student seats, carry out thorough repairs in six schools and less general repairs in forty-two schools. We have no information as to the way the kolkhozniks of the Sharkovskiy rayon fulfilled this colossal program. If with a budget of hundreds of thousand of rubles and with building material and labor power at the disposal of the rayon executive committees the building of schools goes on for several years, one wonders whether kolkhozniks with the "method of the people's construction" will be able to enrich the rayon at their own cost with six new seven-grade schools, expand the school capacity to one thousand seats, and repair all the schools in the rayon. Judging by the pace of the work in constructing schools, Belorussian children will have to study reading and writing in inadequate, cold, restricted schoolrooms for many years to come.

The Soviet authority has assigned the fuel supply and maintenance of schools in country localities to the local population. In the usual confusion and without any organization or building material, schools are not being repaired and are deteriorating. In a number of rayons,

according to the reports of the newspapers, preparation and delivery [346 871] of fuel for schools had not started even in August, shortly before the beginning of the school year.

The success of training in schools is also conditioned by prompt and sufficient provision of students with textbooks, instruments, writing accessories, well equipped and completed physical, chemical and biological school laboratories and libraries. Several Soviet organizations, independent of each other, are engaged in providing students with textbooks in the BSSR. For this reason the textbooks, instruments and writing acessories have to travel a long way before they reach school shelves or bookstores.

"Books are left lying for a long time at the editor's and proof-[214] reader's in the publishing house, they are held up even at the typesetter's. Almost-finished products lie for two and more months at the sewing and binding establishments. All this means that the established norm for the work on textbooks is not fullfilled from one month to another... A considerable number of textbooks is held up because of the shortage of maps and the unsatisfactory organization of the productive process of publication and typography. Books concerned with methodology are being published particularly slowly: Out of 46 such titles which were planned, only 5 have been printed." (Zviazda of May 21st, current year).

Colossal sums are being expended for the printing of various propaganda material, as well as publications designed for foreign countries. This material is made up with special care and luxury. The appearance of the textbooks designed for Soviet schoolchildren is quite different.

"Textbooks are printed on poor paper, covers are smeared with printer's ink. The work of the sewing and binding divisions of the printing press is of a particularly low quality. Many books, even if they are most carefully treated, soon break and fall apart." (Zviazda, April 25th of this year). /72/

The most indispensable tools and products are absent from the school laboratories. The laboratories of provincial and country schools are especially poor. The teaching of physics, chemistry and natural sciences is reduced to a study without experiments and examples. The situation of the school libraries is no better: they are mostly oversupplied with Soviet political literature, while the classics are unavailable. School furniture consists of an assortment of local handicraft production, it is not standardized and not hygienic.

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875 Soviet propaganda falsely claims that the Soviet teacher has been raised to a level upon which the teacher in the capitalist society did not, does not and could not be, that the teacher is the central figure in the school. In fact, however, the Soviet teacher is the teacher with the fewest rights and least security in the world. The teaching ranks in Belorussia have several times been subjected to investigations and purges, thousand of teachers were arrested and deported to concentration camps. The older generation of teachers who survived the First World War and came back to their schools were immediately placed under suspicion by the Soviet authority. They were not trusted, they were considered enemies of Soviet projects. Teachers in cities and villages were subjected to mass arrests during the nineteen-thirties at the time of the suppression of the national democratic movement in Belorussia. Not only the old teachers, but also the young ones, those who had completed the Belorussian university, the pedagogical institutes, were sent to concentration camps in far-away Siberia upon the slightest suspicion of national tendencies. Teacher-experts in regional studies, collectors of folk songs, fables, proverbs, etc., were the ones who suffered particularly. They were all put together with the national demo-
[661] crats, the "enemies of the people". The persecution of the years 1936-1938 definitively liquidated all those who were valuable and intellectual in the teaching profession. Thousands of teachers, male and female, were killed during the war. Those who survived and remained on the territory occupied by the Germans were, once the Soviet authority returned, subjected to cruel punishment and mass deportation from the regions of Belorussia. There are at the present time many vacant teaching positions in the schools. Thus, in the Bobruiskaya oblast'" ... it has become a commonplace fact that schools, children's homes, and rayon sections of national education remain without directors for several months. In the Klichevskiy rayon, for example, one can count eleven people temporarily performing the duties of directors and in charge of teaching in the schools. (Zviazda of May 23rd of this year).

A considerable number of teachers is inexperienced, without special pedagogical preparation, with a feeble general background and cultural development. The inspectors of the schools explain the failure of seven-grade school students by the existence of a large

number of "elevated" teachers. If under Soviet conditions, institutions are managed by non-specialists, then why could not elementary school teachers without an adequate knowledge be "elevated" into the post of lecturer at secondary schools? It has been proved that such "elevation" is practiced in Soviet schools. Therefore, it is not an accident that the knowledge of secondary school students is far from corresponding with the program of instruction and that there also are many who have to repeat a year. In the Klichev secondary school, for example, every fourth student "fails". (Zviazda May 23rd, this year). From these examples it is obvious that the majority of Soviet school teachers lack extensive, systematic study in the acquisition of pedagogical and, to a considerable degree, general knowledge. 875

The Scientific Research Institute of Pedagogy of the Ministry of Education of the BSSR is called upon to study progressive methods of instructive and educative work, to give directives to the oblast' institutes in the task of improving the teachers. [647]

"Those few works which deal with the teaching experience which have been prepared and published by the Scientific Research Institute of Pedagogy, are of an informative character they are not profound in their content, and they lack scientific basis." (Zviazda August 4th, this year).

The oblast' institutes of improvement do not enjoy authority among the teachers. The function of these institutes is to analyze and generalize the best examples of the pedagogical work of teachers and then to introduce them in the schools.

"The people working at the Polotskiy Institute generally do not have a serious attitude towards their obligations. Teachers from the town and the oblast' do not feel that the Institute is improving teachers to the point of active leadership, or that it is actually helping them in their work", - this is how Ozernikov, a teacher from the town of Polotsk, characterizes the work of the Institute. (Zviazda, July 1st, 1953).

The immediate direction of school affairs is carried out by the rayon sections of national education through the appropriate inspectorship. The school inspector is the official state controller of the methods of school instruction, but he is also expected to help teachers with questions of instruction and education. But "in the apparatus of particular rayon sections of national education, and 871 875

871 even in those of the oblast', there are often people who have no
875 adequate pedagogical experience or even any education. Moreover, people who have nothing to do with pedagogy, who turned up by chance, people who are not conscientious, often hold leading teaching positions." This is how Zviazda of July 9th, this year, characterizes the administrative workers who are directing the schools in the Belorussian Soviet Republic.

875 The legal position of the Soviet teacher is unbearably difficult,
554 particularly in villages. He is presented with many demands of all kinds, and at the same time no one accepts him. A great deal of additional social work is laid upon him, and at the same time he has no rights. The teacher must necessarily be an "active citizen, a public worker". The activity and public spirit of the teacher is determined by the local Party and soviet authority, which is in most cases uncultured, limited, and often stubborn. The teacher, according to established procedure, is obliged as an active citizen to participate in all of the numerous gatherings which bear absolutely no relation to school matters; he is expected to express himself in a spirit favorable to the local authority at these gatherings. Arranging the program of all gatherings is also his responsibility. The active teacher has to be a regular visitor of the reading rooms, the club, the red corner, the office of the village soviet, the office of the kolkhoz direction, etc; the visits to these village institutions are usually not connected with necessity or real interest. The teacher must /74/ be a member of all soviet organizations and societies; he abolishes illiteracy, must help in the preschool education, collect signatures for loans. Without his participation the bulletin-board newspaper does not appear. Teachers are being induced to participate not only in political but also in economic campaigns, such as the collection of taxes in kind--of grain, potatoes, milk, salvage, and scrap metal--often at the expense of their regular work at the school. The teacher is expected to be a "militant atheist", to read lectures on anti-religious themes and at the time of great holidays to organize anti-religious demonstrations, games and parades with the students. During election campaigns the teacher is the duty-bound propagandist and agitator for the candidates sponsored by the Communist Party. The president of the village soviet, the kolkhoz and especially the secretary of the local Party cell may call on the teacher at any time to fulfill

various obligations nowhere defined, order that the work at school be discontinued for the purpose of organizing some gathering, etc. Every disobedience, protest and especially withdrawal from this so-called social work is fraught with unpleasant consequences for the village teacher who has no rights. He will be labelled anti-social, a saboteur; he will be "dealt with" at public gatherings, in newspapers which are posted and even in the rayon paper, all this without any regard for the safeguarding of the teacher's authority among the students at the school in which he works. Under such conditions can the teacher find time to prepare for his duties at school, carefully draw up his plan of work, accurately correct written assignments of the students, have time for self-instruction and outside training? It is not an accident, then, that in the Bobruiskaya oblast', out of 429 teachers who had registered for outside training in the Pedagogical Institute only 284 completed the plan of study. In fact, the teacher is placed in a position, deprived of rights, in which he "did not, does not, and could not be" in any state regime except the Soviet.

With such a deplorable composition of the teaching cadres, with their superficial professional and general educational level, one should not expect a correct and successful organization of the pedagogical process in the Soviet school. If, furthermore, one considers the abnormal and often unbearable conditions under which students have to study and teachers have to perform their pedagogical duties, it becomes clear why the law concerning general education is not observed. The frequent cases of students who leave school before their time, failures en masse, a shocking decline of grades, with a low level of the knowledge of subjects studied in school, are not surprising.

Last year the Nineteenth Congress of the Communist Party issued the following resolution:

"The transition from seven-year education to general secondary education (a ten year program) should be completed at the end of the five-year plan in the capitals of the republics, in the subordinate cities of the republics, in the oblast', krai and large industrial centers. Conditions for the full realization of general secondary education (the ten year program) during the next five-year plan should be prepared in other towns and villages."

The Congress also considered it necessary to introduce

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871 polytechnical instruction in the secondary schools and to initiate measures essential for the transition to general polytechnical education. For to bring about general secondary education in the entire Soviet /75/ Union, will require many years of intelligent, serious planning, to ensure the possibility of realizing this very important measure, and large material expenditures beside the Soviet paper rubles. The "completion" of the process of realizing a general seven-year education throughout the country has been going on since 1939, that is, for more than fourteen years. Innumerable facts prove that even the seven-year education is in many cases fictitious, and even the Soviet press does not conceal it. On September 1st of this year, on the day of the beginning of school, the newspaper Izvestiia, after a considerable doese of enthusiasm over the successes of the Soviet school, could not help admitting the following:

"The realization of the transition to secondary education presupposes a universal and strict carrying out of the general seven-year education. But, is the latter organized everywhere? No, unfortunately not everywhere. In the last year in a number of oblast's and rayons not all of the children and adolescents were taught; part of the students left school before the end of the seven-year course. Schools, divisions of national education and executive committees reconciled themselves to this. The preliminary results of the last school year prove that in many schools the level of success of the students is still low, while in a number of rayons there is even some increase in the number of repeaters."

871 There is no need to repeat the reasons for the unfavorable state of instruction in Soviet schools. Schools, like the other domains under Soviet management, suffer from an incurable disease, the source of which is the depraved Soviet system. Such high cultural aims as the transition to a ten-year general education of the children of school age cannot be achieved within one five-year plan. The decision of the Nineteenth Congress of the Communist Party served a propaganda purpose and will have no practical significance over the course of many years.

The transition of schools to polytechnical instruction has better chances of being realized even in a comparatively short time. Polytechnical reform is not a new thing in Soviet schools. Experiments with polytechnical reforms have taken place before, but the

work did not go beyond the students' cutting sticks for colors, etc. 87/ From all indications, the present polytechnical reform was conceived somewhat differently. It will be conducted from above, from the senior classes of the ten-year and even seven-year schools. Soviet authority is interested in preparing qualified cadres of workers. Workers are needed in factories and mills, in kolkhozes, and sovkhozes and at machine and tractor stations. Technical cadres are also very much needed in the Soviet army. And it is to train qualified cadres that the polytechnical reform will be adopted in senior classes of secondary and seven-year schools so as to organize practical work for students in factories and mills for those in cities, and in the workshops of machine and tractor stations and in Kolkhozes and sovkhozes for those in villages. Two aims will be achieved: qualified workers will come out of schools, and during the period of training, millions of adolescents will be used on the works of projects and on the farms. Preparation for the polytechnical reform is already being carried out. The Minister of Education of the RSFSR, Kairov, in his speech of August 10th of this year, spoke of the necessity of reviewing textbooks and programs, "as they are overabundant in second-rate material on geography, history and literature." More than 70 school textbooks are subject to review. The newspaper Pravda of August 18th of this year, in the article "On the Eve of a New School Year" also notes that one of the/76/ worst defects in the work of schools is the overburdening of students, which negatively affects the course of instruction and the education of the children". The Soviet press points also to the illiteracy of students and their poor mastery of the native tongue and of mathematics. The reduction of the programs will, of course, not affect the political curriculum, and the programs of mathematics, physics and chemistry will not be reduced either. The programs of literature, history, geography and other disciplines of the humanities will be reduced to the minimum. Secondary school will approach trade school with the compulsory practical work on projects and farms; the study of exact sciences will be enforced. It is in this light that the new tendency of instruction in Soviet secondary schools is foreseen.

S. Krushinskii